FATHER ABRAHAM

IDA M. TARBELL

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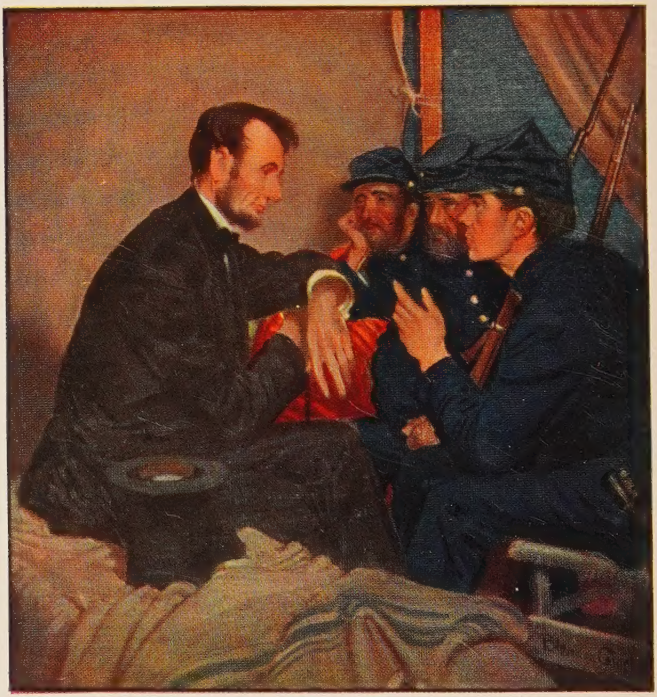

"I Reckon He Learned More From the Soldiers Than He Did From the Generals"

FATHER ABRAHAM

BY

IDA M. TARBELL

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With Illustrations by
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FATHER ABRAHAM

KIND-HEARTED? Mr. Lincoln *kind-hearted?*

I don't believe a man ever lived who'd rather seen everybody happy and peaceable than Abraham Lincoln. He never could stand it to have people sufferin' or not gettin' what they wanted. Time and time again I've seen him go taggin' up street here in this town after some youngster that was blubberin' because he couldn't have what wa'n't good for him. Seemed as if he couldn't rest till that child was smilin' again. You can go all over Springfield and talk to the people who was boys and girls when he lived here and every blamed one will tell you something he did for 'em. Every-

body's friend, that's what *he* was. Jest as natural for him to be that way as 'twas for him to eat or drink.

Yes, I suppose bein' like that *did* make the war harder on him. But he had horse sense as well as a big heart, Mr. Lincoln had. He knew you couldn't have war without somebody gettin' hurt. He *expected* sufferin', but he knew 'twas his business not to have any more than was necessary and to take care of what come. And them was two things that wa'n't done like they ought to 'a' been. That was what worried him.

Seemed as if hardly anybody at the start had any idea of how important 'twas to take good care of the boys and keep 'em from gettin' sick or if they did get sick to cure 'em. I remember Leonard Swett was in here one day 'long back in '61 and he says: "Billy, Mr. Lincoln knows more

about how the soldiers in the Army of the Potomac cook flapjacks than you do about puttin' up quinine. There ain't a blamed thing they do in that army that he ain't interested in. I went down to camp with him one day and I never see an old hunter in the woods quicker to spot a rabbit's track than he was every little kink about the housekeepin'. When we got back to town he just sat and talked and talked about the way the soldiers was livin', seemed to know all about 'em everyways: where they was short of shoes, where the rations were poor, where they had camp-fever worst; told me how hardtack was made, what a good thing quinine and onions are to have handy,—best cure for diarrhea, sore feet, homesickness, everything. I never heard anything like it."

Seemed to bother Swett a little that

Mr. Lincoln took so much interest in all them little things, but I said: "Don't you worry, Mr. Swett, Mr. Lincoln's got the right idee. An army that don't have its belly and feet taken care of ain't goin' to do much fightin', and Mr. Lincoln's got sense enough to know it. He knows diarrhea's a blamed sight more dangerous to the Army of the Potomac than Stonewall Jackson. Trouble so far has been, in *my* judgment, that the people that ought to have been seein' to what the soldiers was eatin' and drinkin' and whether their beds was dry and their bowels movin', was spendin' their time polishin' their buttons and shinin' their boots for parade."

"What I don't see," says Swett, "is how he learned all the things he knows. They ain't the kind of things you'd naturally think a president of the United States would be interestin' himself in."

"An Army That Don't Have Its Belly and Feet Taken Care Of Ain't Goin' To Do Much Fighting"

There 'twas,—same old fool notion that a president ought to sit inside somewhere and think about the Constitution. I used to be that way—always saw a president lookin' like that old picture of Thomas Jefferson up there settin' beside a parlor table holdin' a roll of parchment in his hand, and Leonard Swett was like me a little in spite of his bein' educated.

Learned it! Think of Leonard Swett askin' that with all *his* chances of bein' with Mr. Lincoln! Learned it just as he had everything by bein' so dead interested. He'd learned it if he hadn't been president at all, if he'd just been loafin' around Washington doin' nuthin'. Greatest hand to take notice of things. I tell you he'd made a great war correspondent. Things he'd 'a' seen! And the way he'd 'a' told 'em! I can just see him now pumpin' everybody that had been to the front.

Great man to make you talk, Mr. Lincoln was. I've heard him say himself that most of the education he had he'd got from people who thought they was learnin' from him.

I reckon he learned a lot more from soldiers about how the armies was bein' taken care of than he did from generals. My brother Isaac, who had a place down there addin' up figgers or somethin', used to tell me of seein' Mr. Lincoln stoppin' 'em on the street and out around the White House and talkin' to 'em. Isaac said 'twa'n't becomin' in the President of the United States to be so familiar with common soldiers, he ought to keep among the generals and members of the administration. Isaac always reckoned *himself* a member of the administration.

"More than that," says Isaac, "it ain't dignified for a president to be always run-

nin' out after things himself instead of sendin' somebody. He's always goin' over to the telegraph office with messages, and settin' down by the operators talkin' and readin' dispatches and waitin' for answers. One day he came right up to my office to ask me to look up the record of Johnnie Banks, old Aunt Sally Banks' boy, that was goin' to be shot for desertion. Seemed to think I'd be interested because he came from Illinois—came right up there instead of sendin' for me to go to the White House like he ought to, and when I took what I found over to him and he found out Johnnie wa'n't but eighteen, he put on his hat and went over himself to the telegraph office, took me along, and sent a message that I saw, sayin', '*I don't want anybody as young as eighteen to be shot.*' And that night he went back and sent another message askin' if they'd re-

ceived the first—wasn't satisfied till he knew it couldn't happen. There wa'n't any reason why he should spend his time that way. He ought to give orders and let other folks see they're carried out. That's what I'd do if I was president."

That riled me. "I reckon there ain't any need to worry about *that,* Isaac," I says. "You won't never be president. Mr. Lincoln's got too many folks around him now that don't do nuthin' but give orders. That's one reason he has to do his own executin'."

But 'twas just like him to go and do it himself. So interested he *had* to see to it. I've heard different ones tell time and time again that whenever he'd pardoned a soldier he couldn't rest till he'd get word back that 'twas all right. Did you ever hear about that Vermont boy in McClellan's army, sentenced to be shot along at

the start for sleepin' on his post. 'Twas when they was camped over in Virginia right near Washington. Mr. Lincoln didn't know about it till late and when he heard the story he telegraphed down not to do it. Then he telegraphed askin' if they'd got his orders and when he didn't get an answer what does he do but get in his carriage and drive himself ten miles to camp to see that they didn't do it. Now that's what I call bein' a real president. *That's* executin'.

Well, as I was sayin', *he* understood the importance of a lot of things them young officers and some of the old ones didn't see at all, and he knew where to get the truth about 'em—went right to the soldiers for it. They was just like the folks he was used to, and Mr. Lincoln was the greatest hand for folks—just plain common folks—you ever see. He liked 'em,

never forgot 'em, just natural nice to 'em.

It used to rile old Judge Davis a lot when they was travelin' the circuit, the way Mr. Lincoln never made no difference between lawyers and common folks. I heard Judge Logan tellin' in here one day about their all bein' in the tavern up to Bloomington one day. In those times there was just one big table for everybody. The lawyers and big bugs always set at one end and the teamsters and farmers at the other. Mr. Lincoln used to like to get down among the workin' folks and get the news. Reckon he got kinda tired hearin' discussin' goin' on all the time. Liked to hear about the crops and politics and folks he knew.

This time he was down among 'em, and Judge Davis, who always wanted Lincoln right under his nose, calls out: " Come up

here, Mr. Lincoln; here's where you belong." And Mr. Lincoln, he looked kinda funny at the Judge and he says:

"Got anything better to eat up there, Judge?" And everybody tee-heed.

Feelin' as he did about folks I could see how it would go ag'in the grain for the boys in the army to have a harder time than was necessary. He'd argue that they was doin' the fightin' and ought to have the care. He'd feel a good deal worse about their bein' neglected than he would about the things he knew beforehand he had to stand, like woundin' and killin'. And 'twas just that way so I found out the time I was down to Washington visitin' him.

I told you, didn't I, how I went up to the Soldiers' Home and how we walked out that night and sat and talked till almost mornin'? 'Twas a clear night with

lots of stars and Washington looked mighty pretty lyin' there still and white. Mr. Lincoln pointed out the Capitol and the White House and Arlington and the Long Bridge, showin' me the lay of the land.

"And it's nuthin' but one big hospital, Billy," he said after a while. "You wouldn't think, would you, lookin' down on it so peaceful and quiet, that there's 50,000 sick and wounded soldiers there? Only Almighty God knows how many of 'em are dyin' this minute; only Almighty God knows how many are sufferin' so they're prayin' to die. They are comin' to us every day now—have been ever since the Wilderness, 50,000 here and 150,000 scattered over the country. There's a crawlin' line of sick and wounded all the way from here to Petersburg to-night. There's a line from Georgia to Chatta-

"And It's Nuthin' But One Big Hospital, Billy"

nooga—Sherman's men. You can't put your finger on a spot in the whole North that ain't got a crippled or fever-struck soldier in it. There were days in May, just after the Wilderness, when Mary and I used to drive the carriage along lines of ambulances which stretched from the docks to the hospitals, one, two miles. It was a thing to tear your heart out to see them. They brought them from the field just as they picked them up, with horrible, gaping, undressed wounds, blood and dust and powder caked over them—eaten by flies and mosquitoes. They'd been piled like cord wood on flat cars and transports. Sometimes they didn't get a drink until they were distributed here. Often when it was cold they had no blanket, when it was hot they had no shade. That was nearly four months ago, and still they come. Night after night as I

drive up here from the White House I pass twenty, thirty, forty ambulances in a row distributin' the wounded and sick from Grant's army.

"Think what it means! It means that boys like you and me were, not so long ago, have stood up and shot each other down—have trampled over each other and have left each other wounded and bleeding on the ground, in the rain or the heat, nobody to give 'em a drink or to say a kind word. Nothing but darkness and blood and groans and torture. Sometimes I can't believe it's true. Boys from Illinois where I live, shootin' boys from Kentucky where I was born! It's only when I see them comin' in I realize it—boat load after boat load, wagon load after wagon load. It seemed sometimes after Bull Run and Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville if they didn't stop unload-

in' 'em I'd go plumb crazy. But still they come, and only God knows when they'll stop. They say hell's like war, Billy. If 'tis,—I'm glad I ain't Satan."

Of course I tried to cheer him up. I'd been around visitin' the Illinois boys in the hospitals that day and I just lit in and told him how comfortable I'd found 'em and how chipper most of them seemed. "You'd think 'twas fun to be in the hospital to see some of 'em, Mr. Lincoln," I said. "What do you suppose old Tom Blodgett was doin'? Settin' up darnin' his socks. Yes, sir, insisted on doin' it himself. Said them socks had fit all the way from Washington to Richmond. They'd stood by him and he was goin' to stand by them. Goin' to dress their wounds as good as the doctor had his. Never saw anything so funny as that big feller propped up there tryin' to darn like

he'd seen his mother do and all the time makin' fun. All the boys around were laffin' at him—called him the sock doctor.

"And things were so clean and white and pretty and the women were runnin' around just like home."

"God bless 'em," he said. "I don't know what we'd 'a' done if it hadn't been for the way the women have taken hold. Come down here willin' to do anything; women that never saw a cut finger before, will stand over a wound so terrible men will faint at the sight of it. I've known of women spendin' whole nights on a battlefield huntin' for somebody they'd lost and stoppin' as they went to give water and take messages. I've known 'em to work steady for three days and nights without a wink of sleep down at the front after a battle, takin' care of the wounded. Here in Washington you can't stop 'em

as long as they can see a thing to be done. At home they're supportin' the families and workin' day and night to help us. They give their husbands and their boys and then themselves. God bless the women, Billy. We can't save the Union without 'em.

" It makes a difference to the boys in a hospital havin' 'em. People don't realize how young this army is. Half the wounded here in Washington to-day are *children*—not twenty yet—lots of 'em under eighteen. Children who never went to sleep in their lives before they went into the army without kissin' their mothers good-night. You take such a boy as that and let him lie in camp a few months gettin' more and more tired of it and he gets homesick—plain homesick—he wants his mother. Perhaps he don't know what's the matter and he wouldn't admit

it if he did. First thing you know he's in the hospital with camp fever, or he gets wounded. I tell you a woman looks good to him.

" It's a queer thing to say, Billy, but I get real comfort out of the hospitals. When you know what the wounded have been through—how they have laid on the battlefields for hours and hours uncared for, how they've suffered bein' hauled up here, there ain't nuthin' consoles you like knowin' that their wounds have been dressed and that they are clean and fed, and looked after. Then they are so thankful to be here—to have some one to see to 'em. I remember one day a boy who had been all shot up but was gettin' better sayin' to me: ' Mr. Lincoln, I can't sleep nights thinkin' how comfortable I am.' It's so good to find 'em realizin' that everybody cares—the whole country.

People come and read to 'em and write letters for 'em and bring 'em things. Why, they have real good times at some of the places. Down to Armory Square Bliss has got a melodeon and they have concerts sometimes, and there are flags up and flowers in the windows. I got some flower seeds last summer for Bliss to plant outside, but they turned out to be lettuce and onions. The boys ate 'em and you ought to heard 'em laugh about my flowers. I tell you it makes me happy when I go around and find the poor fellows smilin' up at me and sayin': 'You're takin' good care of us, Mr. Lincoln,' and maybe crack a joke.

"They take it all so natural, trampin' and fightin' and dyin'. It's a wonderful army—wonderful! You couldn't believe that boys that back home didn't ever have a serious thought in their heads could ever

be so dead set as they be about an idee. Think of it! A million men are lookin' up at these stars to-night, a million men ready to die for the Union to-morrow if it's got to be done to save it! I tell you, it shows what's in 'em. They're all the same, young or old—the Union's got to be saved! Of course you'd expect it more of the old ones, and we've got some old ones, older than the law allows, too. 'Tain't only the youngsters who have lied themselves into the service. Only to-day a Congressman was in tellin' me about one of his constituents, said he was over sixty-five and white-haired when he first enlisted. They refused him of course, and I'll be blamed if the old fellow didn't dye his hair black and change his name, and when they asked him his age, said: 'Rising thirty-five,' and he's been fightin' good for two years and now they'd found

him out. The Congressman asked me what he ought to do. I told him if 'twas me I'd keep him in hair dye."

We was still a while and then Mr. Lincoln began talkin', more to himself than to me.

"A million men, a mighty host—and one word of mine would bring the million sleeping boys to their feet—send them without a word to their guns—they would fall in rank—regiment on regiment, brigade on brigade, corps on corps, a word more and they would march steady, quiet, a million men in step straight ahead, over fields, through forests, across rivers. Nothing could stop them—cannons might tear holes in their ranks, and they would fill them up, a half million might be bled out of them, and a word of mine would bring a half million more to fill their place.

Oh, God, my God," he groaned, under his breath, " what am I that Thou shouldst ask this of me! What am I that Thou shouldst trust me so!"

Well, I just dropped my head in my hands—seemed as if I oughten to look at him—and the next thing I knew Mr. Lincoln's arm was over my shoulder and he was saying in that smilin' kind of voice he had: " Don't mind me, Billy. The Lord generally knows what He's about and He can get rid of me quick enough if He sees I ain't doin' the job—quicker than the Copperheads can."

Just like him to change so. Didn't want anybody to feel bad. But I never forgot that, and many a time in my sleep I've heard Abraham Lincoln's voice crying out: " Oh, God, my God, what am I that Thou shouldst ask this of me! " and I've groaned to think how often through

"What Am I That Thou Shouldst Ask This of Me"

them four awful years he must have lifted up his face with that look on it and asked the Lord what in the world he was doing that thing for.

"After all, Billy," he went on, "it's surprisin' what a happy army it is. In spite of bein' so dead in earnest and havin' so much trouble of one kind and another, seems sometimes as if you couldn't put 'em anywhere that they wouldn't scare up some fun. Greatest chaps to sing on the march, to cut up capers and play tricks you ever saw. I reckon the army's a little like me, it couldn't do its job if it didn't get a good laugh now and then—sort o' clears up the air when things are lookin' blue. Anyhow the boys are always gettin' themselves into trouble by their pranks. Jokin' fills the guard-house as often as drunkenness or laziness. That and their bein' so sassy. A lot of 'em

think they know just as much as the officers do, and I reckon they're right pretty often. It takes some time to learn that it ain't good for the service for them to be speakin' their minds too free. At the start they did it pretty often—do now sometimes. Why, only just this week Stanton told me about a sergeant, who one day when the commanding officer was relieving his mind by swearing at his men, stepped right out of the ranks and reproved him and said he was breaking the law of God. Well, they clapped him in the guard-house and now they want to punish him harder—say he ain't penitent—keeps disturbin' the guard-house by prayin' at the top of his voice for that officer. I told Stanton we better not interfere, that there wasn't nothing in the regulations against a man's prayin' for his officers.

"Don't Mind Me, Billy, The Lord Generally Knows What He's About"

"Yes, it's a funny army. There don't seem to be but one thing that discourages it, and that's not fightin'. Keep 'em still in camp where you'd think they'd be comfortable and they go to pieces every time. It's when they're lyin' still we have the worst camp fever and the most deserters. Keep 'em on the move, let 'em think they're goin' to have a fight and they perk up right off.

"We can't fail with men like that. Make all the mistakes we can, they'll make up for 'em. The hope of this war is in the common soldiers, not in the generals —not in the War Department, not in me. It's in the boys. Sometimes it seems to me that nobody sees it quite right. It's in war as it is in life—a whole raft of men work day and night and sweat and die to get in the crops and mine the ore and build the towns and sail the seas. They

make the wealth but they get mighty little of it. We ain't got our values of men's work figured out right yet—the value of the man that gives orders and of the man that takes 'em. I hear people talkin' as if the history of a battle was what the generals did. I can't help thinkin' that the history of this war is in the knapsack of the common soldier. He's makin' that history just like the farmers are makin' the wealth. We fellows at the top are only usin' what they make.

"At any rate that's the way I see it, and I've tried hard ever since I've been down here to do all I could for the boys. I know lots of officers think I peek around camp too much, think 'tain't good for discipline. But I've always felt I ought to know how they was livin' and there didn't seem to be no other sure way of findin' out. Officers ain't always good

housekeepers, and I kinda felt I'd got to keep my eye on the cupboard.

"I reckon Stanton thinks I've interfered too much, but there's been more'n enough trouble to go around in this war, and the only hope was helpin' where you could. But 'tain't much one can do. I can no more help every soldier that comes to me in trouble than I can dip all the water out of the Potomac with a teaspoon.

"Then there's that pardoning business. Every now and then I have to fix it up with Stanton or some officer for pardoning so many boys. I suppose it's pretty hard for them not to have all their rules lived up to. They've worked out a lot of laws to govern this army, and I s'pose it's natural enough for 'em to think the most important thing in the world is havin' 'em obeyed. They've got it fixed so the boys do everything accordin' to

regulations. They won't even let 'em die of something that ain't on the list—got to die accordin' to the regulations. But by jingo, Billy, I ain't goin' to have boys shot accordin' to no dumb regulations! I ain't goin' to have a butcher's day every Friday in the army if I can help it. It's so what they say about me, that I'm always lookin' for an excuse to pardon somebody. I do it every time I can find a reason. When they're young and when they're green or when they've been worked on by Copperheads or when they've got disgusted lyin' still and come to think we ain't doin' our job—when I see that I ain't goin' to have 'em shot. And then there's my leg cases. I've got a drawerful. They make Holt maddest—says he ain't any use for cowards. Well, generally speakin' I ain't, but I ain't sure what I'd do if I was standin' in front

of a gun, and more'n that as I told Holt if Almighty God gives a man a cowardly pair of legs how can he help their running away with him?

"You can't make me believe it's good policy to shoot these soldiers, anyhow. Seems to me one thing we've never taken into account as we ought to is that this is a *volunteer* army. These men came down here to put an end to this rebellion and not to get trained as soldiers. They just dropped the work they was doin' right where it was—never stopped to fix up things to be away long. Why, we've got a little minister at the head of one company that was preachin' when he heard the news of Bull Run. He shut up his Bible, told the congregation what had happened, and said: 'Brethren, I reckon it's time for us to adjourn this meetin' and go home and drill,' and they did it, and now they're

down with Grant. When the war's over that man will go back and finish that sermon.

"That's the way with most of 'em. You can't treat such an army like you would one that had been brought up to soljerin' as a business. They'll take discipline enough to fight, but they don't take any stock in it as a means of earnin' a livin'.

"More'n that they've got their own ideas about politics and military tactics and mighty clear ideas about all of us that are runnin' things. You can't fool 'em on an officer. They know when one ain't fit to command, and time and time again they've pestered a coward or a braggart or a bully out of the service. An officer who does his job best he can, even if he ain't very smart, just honest and faithful, they'll stand by and help. If he's a big

one, a real big man, they can't do enough for him. Take the way they feel about Thomas, the store they set by him. I met a boy on crutches out by the White House the other day and asked him where he got wounded. He told me about the place they held. 'Pretty hot, wasn't it?' I said. 'Yes, but Old Pap put us there and he wouldn't 'a' done it if he hadn't known we could 'a' held it.' No more question 'Old Pap' than they would God Almighty. But if it had been some generals they'd skedaddled.

"They ain't never made any mistake about *me* just because I'm president. A while after Bull Run I met a boy out on the street here on crutches, thin and white, and I stopped to ask him about how he got hurt. Well, Billy, he looked at me hard as nails, and he says: 'Be you Abe Lincoln?' And I said, 'Yes.' 'Well,'

he says, ' all I've got to say is you don't know your job. I enlisted glad enough to do my part and I've done it, but you ain't done yourn. You promised to feed me, and I marched three days at the beginning of these troubles without anything to eat but hardtack and two chunks of salt pork—no bread, no coffee—and what I did get wasn't regular. They got us up one mornin' and marched us ten miles without breakfast. Do you call that providin' for an army? And they sent us down to fight the Rebs at Bull Run, and when we was doin' our best and holdin' 'em—I tell you, holdin' 'em—they told us to fall back. I swore I wouldn't—I hadn't come down there for that. They made me—rode me down. I got struck —struck in the back. Struck in the back and they left me there—never came for me, never gave me a drink and I dyin' of

"Be You Abe Lincoln?"

thirst. I crawled five miles for water, and I'd be dead and rottin' in Virginia to-day if a teamster hadn't picked me up and brought me to this town and found an old darkey to take care of me. You ain't doin' your job, Abe Lincoln; you won't win this war until you learn to take care of the soldiers.'

"I couldn't say a thing. It was true. It's been true all the time. It's true to-day. We ain't takin' care of the soldiers like we ought.

"You don't suppose such men are goin' to accept the best lot of regulations ever made without askin' questions? Not a bit of it. They know when things are right and when they're not. When they see a man who they know is nothing but a boy or one they know's bein' eat up with homesickness or one whose term is out, and ought to be let go, throwing every-

thing over and desertin', it don't make them any better soldiers to have us shoot him. Makes 'em worse in my judgment, makes 'em think we don't understand. Anyhow, discipline or no discipline, I ain't goin' to have any more of it than I can help. It ain't good common sense.

" You can't run *this* army altogether as if 'twas a machine. It ain't. It's a *people's* army. It offered itself. It has come down here to fight this thing out—just as it would go to the polls. It is greater than its generals, greater than the administration. We are created to care for it and lead it. It is not created for us. Every day the war has lasted I've felt this army growin' in power and determination. I've felt its hand on me, guiding, compelling, threatening, upholding me, felt its distrust and its trust, its blame and its love. I've felt its patience and its

sympathy. The greatest comfort I get is when sometimes I feel as if mebbe the army understood what I was tryin' to do whether Greeley did or not. They understood because it's *their* war. Why, we might fail, every one of us, and this war would go on. The army would find its leaders like they say the old Roman armies sometimes did and would finish the fight.

"I tell you, Billy, there ain't nuthin' that's ever happened in the world so far as I know that gives one such faith in the people as this army and the way it acts. There's been times, I ain't denyin', when I didn't know but the war was goin' to be too much for us, times when I thought that mebbe a republic like this couldn't stand such a strain. It's the kind of government we've got that's bein' tested in this war, government by the people, and

it's the People's Army that makes me certain it can't be upset."

I tell you it done me good to see him settin' up straight there talkin' so proud and confident, and as I was watchin' him there popped into my head some words from a song I'd heard the soldiers sing:

We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more—
From Mississippi's winding stream and from New England's shore.

You have called us and we're coming. By Richmond's bloody tide
To lay us down, for Freedom's sake, our brothers' bones beside;

Six hundred thousand loyal men and true have gone before—
We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more.

That was it. That was what he was, the Father of the Army, Father Abraham, and somehow the soldiers had found it out. Curious how a lot of people who never see a man in their lives will come to understand him exact.

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